

Ways of the Wandervogel

Al Lichtenberg

Whenever the weather permitted, our group would meet in the garden. That was as it should be, because one of the movement's aims was to lead German youth back to nature. From our homes, mostly hemmed-in, overstuffed apartments in the dreary streets of a modern city, we came to this green spot to give the garden tools a workout, to sing our songs, and to ponder the world.

Red's father, a well-to-do realtor, allowed us to use the garden. This was *his* way of doing something for the young folks and at the same time spread the word of his munificence in the Jewish community. I am not saying that this form of publicity brought him actual gain—the art of public relations was still in its infancy during the late 1920s—but conceivably one or the other parent contemplating a land deal may have beaten a path to his door.

In the garden, Red assumed a proprietary air—half in fun and without exactly bragging about it. He would wag his ears a little, wrinkle his nose until it was all freckles and admonish us not to slam into the fence when we were rough-housing.

“The girls with their duck feet have ruined the flowerbeds again,” he said. “And someone made a hole in the locker room wall.”

Later he told me confidently that the hole had its uses; to watch the girls change into their gym suits, for instance. The trouble with Red was that he lacked the spirit of seriousness which was so important to the *Kameraden*. Loosely affiliated with the German youth movement—also known as *Wandervogel*, or birds of passage—we were devoted to “clean living” and frowned upon frivolity in any shape or form. Wine, liquor and tobacco were also taboo.

Red had a way of venting his vivid imagination through lurid talk whenever he could find a listener; I must confess that on more than one occasion I lent him my ear. In this respect I was no match for Bernie. Staunch, steadfast Bernie! Without batting an eye he would inform Red that he was out of order, and that was the end of all glib talk. But Bernie was not a sissy in any sense of the word. A pretty good athlete—outgoing and well-liked by almost anybody, regardless of sex. Even Red seemed to take his rebuffs gracefully. Bernie had the makings of a future leader; already he was the fair-haired boy of Paleface, who was in charge of our group.

Paleface's nickname was due to his sallow complexion, frequently brightened up by a smile; friendly, but not quite free of self-indulgence. In his hiking outfit he was a sight to behold—the knee pants and turquoise blue tunic laced at the neck which was our official garb. He even wore it to school at times, something I would never have dared for fear of my classmates' taunts. Paleface had real strength of character—or else he was simply indifferent to the reactions of outsiders.

Paleface was in his last year at the Gymnasium and we, his charges, were going on fifteen. We were approaching the age of initiation; figuratively speaking, that is.

For the new boys there was a regular “hazing” routine but that was long behind us. The novice was blindfolded and received a whacking, with each of the participants in turn lending a “hand.” The painful procedure continued until the victim had guessed the identity of the perpetrator, but through trickery it could be protracted at will, sometimes with tearful consequences; oddly enough, the exercise was known as “American paddling.” Intended to test a boy’s mettle, it certainly had a “hardening” effect on his buttocks.

Physical fitness and hardiness were important, especially in the Völkerball games—*our* favorite pastime. Paleface always stuffed the solid, fifteen-pound ball, which had to be caught in mid-air, with some rocks—for extra toughness, as he explained it. It had paid off the previous summer when we attended the *Kameraden* annual meet, bringing together boys and girls from all over Germany in a three-day round of games and singing (as well as “deep talk”). At the high point we gathered in solemn communion around a giant campfire to hear an address of our new president, a college student of about twenty, from a North German city.

“Beware of compromise,” Arthur told us. “We are committed to lead ‘unbroken’ lives, free from society’s deceptions and double standards.”

After the meet, our party of seven boys set out for a month-long hiking trip through Bavaria and into the Alps. Whoever had planned the itinerary was more concerned with points of scenic and historic interest than with our capacity to get there—via shank’s mare, of course. Occasionally there were days of rest when Paleface tended our sore feet and similar afflictions with a practiced hand, and sometimes he had to assume the role of the stern father.

Like the time when Red and I sneaked away to a restaurant. After an extended diet of mushroom stew, prepared from fungi we first had to gather in the woods, we became allergic to “nature” and were ready for some real grub. It was the best meal we had had since leaving home, but hardly worth the tongue-lashing we received after getting back to camp—for indulging ourselves.

Or my temporary disappearance in Munich where I took time off to visit an aunt and didn’t get back to the group until the next day. My aunt would not hear of my spending the night at the youth hostel, and I had no way of letting Paleface know. He was so happy to see me again that he almost forgot to call me to task for my desertion.

Otherwise the trip was a great success and it taught me the ropes of group living. Henceforth I was never to cause trouble again—at least not in such a childish, guileless sort of way.

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Bernie and Paleface were pretty close; then there was Ham, Danny and I. Ham was a bit of an actor, easily carried away by his emotions, forever bubbling, and with a penchant

for the well-sounding phrase; he was good-looking, with an Italian cast to his brunette head. Danny was a sturdy fellow, the down-to-earth no-nonsense type, but a good sport nonetheless. He could be a little patronizing at times, for no apparent reason; I think it was because he was the oldest at home. Ham was an only child.

Together we made quite a trio, and we usually had our way in the group if we stuck together. Of the others, I remember only Bert. He was the bookish type, and didn't quite seem to belong. In the garden, Bert would usually go off by himself, or climb the big apple tree, sitting up there and staring into space. At other times, he held forth on such remote subjects as the Gallic Wars, or Oliver Cromwell, who was his hero.

Red, though not much younger than us, had been relegated to a junior group on grounds of "immaturity." He was not serious enough to participate in the weighty discussion at the *Heim-Abend*, our weekly gathering. On one of these occasions someone inquired about the difference between the youth movement and the Boy Scouts.

"The boys with the neckerchiefs are *Banausen*—people without any higher aims in life," Paleface said. "They remind me of midgets—would-be grown-ups who share all the false values of the adult world."

Today they would probably be called "squares." The Baden-Powell movement, originating in England, was indeed intended as preparation for an adult life whose basic aims were not questioned. Not so the youth movement. The latter in a way anticipated many features of the "beat" generation, but in a more disciplined fashion. At least we had a plan; rejecting society's moral code, we adopted one of our own.

Paleface then told us about the origins of the youth movement, whose founders were rebels with a cause.

"It was at the turn of the century when German youth rediscovered the woods and the mountains along with old folkways and plain dress, rebelling against a world that was hemmed in by corsets and stiff collars. They felt a yearning for *Natürlichkeit*, a 'return to nature.' But their ideas made good sense, too, because they favored a healthier life."

He was referring to the ban on drinking—and smoking—which had been taken over from the American Good Templars. This organization had a certain following in Germany at the time.

"Soon the various groups which had sprung up spontaneously across the country joined hands in a common pledge, proclaiming self-determination for German youth, and a promise to be fair, just and 'true to themselves.' In other words, they declared their independence—not to be hampered by adult meddling, like the Boy Scouts."

Just what that "inner truth" was, Paleface never told us; perhaps he didn't know himself. In a way it enabled those who took the pledge to write their own ticket, depending on the needs of the hour. It did not prevent the *Wandervogel* from rushing to the flags as a unit when the war broke out in 1914; many fell at the battle of Langemarck.

“You know what happened after the war,” Paleface continued. “Among the general bickering, the youth groups split up, too, and went their own ways. The old unity was gone, but the need of the young for joining together and being among themselves was greater than ever. As German Jews, we wanted an identity of our own, and that’s how the *Kameraden* came to be.

The spectre of politics in post-war Germany overshadowed the youth groups along with everything else. We gladly cooperated with organizations of democratic caliber, but avoided extremists of the Left and Right. We had no use for the former, and the latter wouldn’t have us, which caused us no grief. The name *Kameraden* had no political connotations—it simply stood for “good fellowship.” As the twenties wore on, the interest in Jewish matters increased, but nobody could foresee that the search for the “good life” would eventually lead many of us to a kibbutz in Israel. Not even Paleface.

Our special scorn was reserved for one very popular social activity: ballroom dancing along with jazz music. The Charleston vogue had passed and given way to the relatively dignified tango and fox trot, but whatever their names, we were to stay clear of the whole disgraceful business. (Folk dancing was “natural” and therefore approved of.) In the eyes of the movement, social dancing was the frothy topping on the dubious structure that was our parents’ world; the false front that covered up even more sordid goings-on.

Actually, our bark was worse than our bite, and some of us got along quite well with our parents. Paleface, for instance, was very attached to his mother, and for good reasons. She was amazingly young and vivacious, compared with the matronly ways of most mothers—or with her own husband, at least a dozen years older. Sometimes she participated in our activities; she knew most of the old tunes in our repertory, many of them dating from the Peasant Wars, and could accompany us on the guitar.

“Bert, you are off key,” she might say, “and *everybody* put a little more *feeling* behind it. All together now.”

We were rehearsing for the annual parents’ night where the theme song was to be:
“When Adam delved and Even spun
Where was then the nobleman?”
When we finally got it right she praised us. “That was perfect,” she said. “You sang it with real working class spirit.” Paleface beamed.

At the *Elternabend* the parents were treated to a mixed diet of entertainment and orientation. We put on a Romain Rolland play with a pacifist “message”; Ham, in the lead part, overacted terribly and promptly brought the house down. And then Arthur, our president who now attended a technical college in town, addressed the audience.

“These are bewildering times,” he said. “The old confidence is gone—now we need new rules for the game. When you buy an item at a store, something with moveable parts, they give you instructions for its use, a little manual perhaps, in short a *Gebrauchsanweisung*. And so it is with life today—we need new directions...guidance, especially for the young.”

Arthur was an impressive debater who relied heavily on cold logic, but his reasoning was punctured by the new malaise which began to seize Germans then—the call for leaders to carry the burden of responsibility.

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There had been a slight estrangement between Paleface and Bernie when the latter had attended a dancing class, on the insistence of his parents who wanted him to be properly introduced to society, according to bourgeois custom. My own hunch is that Bernie gave in too easily to parental pressure and then rather enjoyed the experience, and for Paleface it was quite a blow at the time. But his faith in Bernie could not be shaken for long; soon they were in tandem again.

Ham and I were close friends. We both quit school around the same time and got our start in the world of commerce, the very same that Paleface had said was a seedbed of the double standard. What interested us more about our new life, however, were the people we now met, especially the girls: young secretaries, clerks, shop girls and what have you.

More and more often our talks turned to the subject of girls in general and sex in particular. There was a new book out which discussed these matters quite frankly; it came from America, and was called *The Revolt of Modern Youth*. Ham gave me his copy on the sly.

“In America they know much more about these things,” he said. “We are real hicks by comparison.”

“Maybe that’s why my sister likes it so well in the States. It’s almost a year since she went over. One of these days I’m going to get there, too.”

“America leaves me cold,” Ham said. “For one thing, it’s too big—people are always rushing around there. The place I want to go if I ever leave here is Siam. It’s a fascinating country, with tiger hunts in the jungle, and the people are easy-going.”

For Ham this was a familiar tune, connected with his uncle Willie who was Siamese consul and the kingdom’s South German representative. Uncle Willie had never been further than Hamburg but the post carried a title, in addition to a small income, both of which appealed to this pot-bellied German burgher. The idea of going to Siam fired Ham’s imagination; it was something of a standing joke between him and the “Honorary Consul.”

He addressed the consul as “uncle” although he was just a friend of the family—one of the slightly eccentric characters Ham’s mother “collected.” She also had some actor friends from our local theatre: a chic woman of forty, she was a vivacious type and had a friendly word for everybody—except her own husband.

Whatever the reasons that brought them together, now their married life was a sham, perhaps continued only for the boy’s sake. On my many visits to their house I never witnessed an outright scene between them, but I saw the mother’s contemptuous stares, and heard her slighting remarks, to which the husband reacted like a whipped dog.

Ham made the best of this awkward situation and observed a measure of civility toward his old man although he was on his mother's side. "Dad has a compact little business," he might say. "He can carry his entire bookkeeping system in the vest pocket." Failure in business was perhaps the greatest humiliation in a money-minded community. Ham's father worked as a door-to-door salesman.

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A hurried reading of *The Revolt of Modern Youth* generated an idea which I prompted conveyed to Ham and Danny, the third in our "trio." Why couldn't we apply some of the principles of coeducation right here in our own group? It had been done in other parts of the movement and was right in line with the spirit of *Natürlichkeit*. Why not put it up to Paleface or discuss it with the girls themselves in a spirit of honesty and without bourgeois coyness? Ham was all for it; so was Danny, but then he had second thoughts, betraying a bit of unexpected insight.

Had it not occurred to us, he asked, that Paleface never mingled with girls? What was the matter with a boy of eighteen who never seemed to make dates or go on Sunday hikes with a girl alone, like some of the other seniors?

Ham and I were not sure, and we were willing to give Paleface the benefit of the doubt. In the end we all agreed to bring the matter up for discussion.

Paleface had the situation well under control when the matter came up at the next meeting; in fact, he was capable of great detachment towards the subject, for reasons we were to learn later. Now he said only that we should approach the matter with the required reverence, and dismiss all thoughts of profanity from our minds. He was going to take it up with the girl leaders. There was the question of age levels to be considered; slightly younger girls might be more suitable because they matured earlier than boys.

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We knew most of the girls already, but our first encounter as a group was on a Sunday hike. There were five or six of them—in turquoise blouses that matched our tunics—but only three make any claim on memory; the rest also ran. There is something about uniform dress which is inexplicably opposed to woman's nature, but in a way it makes a man's choice easier since extraneous detail is eliminated.

Ellen was prim and proper; Martha the good-natured, make-a-boy-feel-at-home type, and Ann had a mysterious air. She wore her hair in sleek page-boy fashion, had expressive blue eyes and moved about gracefully. As we walked the girls stayed close together; we adjusted our stride for fear of leaving them behind. Not so long ago we had scorned all the long-haired ones, but now we were suddenly eager to accommodate.

Later we came to rest at a brookside, shared our food and played some games. The girls were not up to our pace in *Völkerball* and soon dropped out, taking up a milder form of exercise. Ann's figure showed up to advantage in shorts, and she seemed to be a good runner.

Flattery, in our code, was a fault not to be condoned, but I managed to say something vaguely complimentary to her.

“I am taking dance lessons,” Ann informed me. “It’s very good for developing the body.”

“What kind of dancing?” I inquired, remembering another of our taboos. “Not ballroom dancing, surely.”

“Of course not. Nor ballet either,” she said. “I am studying with Mary Wigman—the rhythmic dance.”

“Are you familiar with Eurythmics, the Rudolf Steiner method?” I had been to one of their recitals just recently.

“Yes, but I don’t like it. My mother thinks it’s queer.”

We were now launched on a new phase of furthering human relationships, variously referred to as linking, binding or tying people together. Ideally, each “soul” would sooner or later find its counterpart in the other sex, preferably in the group itself which would thus become a lifetime affair; this development was going to attain added significance later, at the time of the “Exodus” from Germany.

Ham and I were hardly interested in permanent ties at this juncture, but we felt that the first meeting with the girls had been worthwhile. He was quite impressed with Ellen, with whom he had a good talk; she planned to study medicine later and he was somehow flattered that she showed an interest in him—a boy who went to business. And then he asked how I had fared; he had seen me with Ann.

“Frankly, I don’t think much will come of *that*,” I said. “We would run out of things to say pretty soon, I’m afraid. But this girl Martha seems to be the sensible type—if you can go by first impressions.”

“That’s possible,” said Ham, without conviction. “By the way, I noticed that Bernie didn’t get involved at all. How do you figure that?”

“Knowing Bernie, it doesn’t surprise me. He prefers to not to commit himself, if he can help it.”

When we told Red about the latest development in our group his surprise knew no bounds. How did we put it over on Paleface, he wanted to know, and who had linked up with whom?

“Boy, what I wouldn’t do to get into a mixed group!” he said. “I could show them a thing or two.”

With the girls around, the *Helm-Abend* now took on heightened interest. Ann rarely said anything but Ellen spoke up in her measured, vibrant voice and Martha would come out with plain home-truths. Among the boys, Bert kept his own counsel, as before, and rarely came out of his shell. Danny had found favor with a girl in another group, somewhat older and of restless disposition; Beth's mind was in perpetual ferment and she needed a strong, level-headed fellow like him to lean on.

Amid this tender web of boy-girl relations, Paleface managed to keep a guiding hand—or at least tried to. Candor was the bedrock of the movement, posed against the artful deceptions of the bourgeois world. He had always told us that we were to have no secrets from each other; we should reveal our innermost feelings whose sum total would embody the group spirit. But now, with the coming of the girls, there was a new element of unknown dimensions. Were we still to display our private thoughts for all to see?

Here Paleface was out of his depth, in uncharted waters, as it were; yet he did not realize it—or tried to ignore the change. Snugly comfortable in a sheltered home with understanding parents, an only child catered to by his solicitous mother, he had bypassed the “pangs of puberty” and never fully realized what separated—and attracted—the sexes. *Vive la difference* did not exist in his book, and so Paleface proceeded as before.

Our discussions now turned to the subject of “Mental Hygiene” and Paleface referred to a text by F.W. Foerster, a popular writer on such matters, entitled *Lebensführung*. The gist of these exhortative lectures was that continence and self-discipline were as essential in sex as in other vices, like drinking and smoking. We were warned against the idea, prevalent in some circles, that sexual release was health-promoting; on the contrary, it could lead to severe guilt complexes and psychic disturbances, not to mention infectious disease. Nature, in her infinite wisdom, had endowed us with chastity as an inner protection; this was self-evident as far as the girls were concerned—“built-in,” so to speak. For the boys, self-control and restraint were necessary to lift us above animal levels: through mastery of our lower instincts we would reap the benefits of sublimation. And all of us who practiced continence would be “ultimately rewarded,” Paleface said in conclusion, somewhat darkly.

Although the general tenor of his talks was “clinical,” there were some embarrassing moments, and not much discussion. Ham and I could not help feeling that this was a long cry from *The Revolt of Modern Youth*, and he later told me:

“I am beginning to wonder whether knows what he is talking about. Perhaps he's never felt the urge.”

“What did he mean by ‘ultimate rewards’ anyway?”

“That's bunk, if you ask me. He must have meant spiritual, or something.”

“Yes, mind over body—the eternal tug-of-war. Sometimes it goes badly. Remember Paul.”

Paul's was a special case which had caused quite a stir at the time. He was Red's cousin, but he and his widowed mother were merely tolerated as poor relations by the

family. Paul was brainy, though, and used his sharp wit to get back at them—and almost everybody else—in caustic criticism. Why he took me into his confidence I will never know since he did not care for me in that special way he did other boys.

Out of the blue, I got a telegram one day from Italy where Paul had fled to end his “predicament.” He wanted to see Venice—and die. His suicide attempt failed but now the secret was out; at least Paul had the courage to face up to his condition. After his return, months later, there were some frank talks with the people involved amid an atmosphere of understanding, and Paul managed to “come to terms” with himself, after a fashion.

Like Lawrence of Arabia—whom he admired—he later turned into a “soldier of fortune.” Paul fought in the war against Hitler and served in the Israeli army where he was killed by an Arab bullet in 1948.

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It was at a community rally concerning the Palestine question that I saw Olga for the first time and fell for her immediately. She had a Mona Lisa smile, natural curls that came down to her shoulders and was like a fresh breeze that had blown in from the East; with her parents and three sisters, she had come from Russia a few years earlier.

Whether the Lobinskis intended to stay permanently in our town is now a moot question; at any event, their interest in the Jewish homeland was instinctive. This could not be said of many German Jews to whom Zionism had controversial aspects. Opinions at the rally were roughly divided into three groups: the pros, the cons, and the “yes, but” segment. The latter were generally in favor of settlement but had reservations on the Arab question, both on ethical and practical grounds. In 1929 there were perhaps 200,000 Jews in the Holy Land against a million Arabs—mostly hostile—and this gave reason for concern. Those who were against argued that open support for the cause would be grist to the mill of the German antisemites, who would brand it as divided loyalty, if not treason.

If the Zionist cause prevailed that evening—assuring the hoped for financial support—it was largely due to the reasoned appeal of one man, a high official in the state service, who combined political wisdom with courage and conviction. It was his dominant personality, as much as adroit argumentation, which carried the motion that evening.

Although far from united on the Zionist issue, the *Kameraden* present at the rally were proud that he was also the father of one of their boys. Afterwards we gathered for further discussion at a milkbar, and at last I was able to get close to Olga.

She was in charge of a young girls’ group and went to the *gymnasium*; I quickly computed that she had to be two years older than I. Still, she seemed to be genuinely interested in me—or was I fooled by that steady gaze of hers, and the Mona Lisa smile?

For the moment, I did not try to solve the enigma; I preferred blissful uncertainty and saw Olga as often as I could. Meeting her family, including three charming sisters, revealed a new world to me: not as *gut bürgerlich* as our own, with fewer trimmings and luxuries, but more alive, and in some ways more worldly.

The Lobinskis were broad-minded; they seemed to feel at home in their new surroundings, and were readily accepted by us. So were others like them. But many of the Eastern Jews who came to Germany during the twenties clung to their clannish, parochial ways and such contact was never established. What may well be at the bottom of this rift is a deep-seated difference of outlook—as between West and East, between individualism and togetherness. To blame it all on the conceit of German Jews is simply a distortion of the facts, adding insult to injury; unfortunately it persists in some quarters to this very day.

Alas, it was only a matter of time till I found out that Olga was never to be mine. My “rival” was none other than Arthur, the engineering student and former president of the *Kameraden*. To my jaundiced eye, they were ill-matched: Arthur the rationalist and Olga, this warm vibrant Jewish girl from the East.

In the meantime, Arthur’s strange ideas had led him further away from the moderate political views that prevailed among us; more and more he came to see the wave of the future on the Right, in a conservative direction. “(The *National Review* had prototypes in the Weimar Republic!) His peculiar vision was of a “Technocracy,” an “organic” society under the leadership of managers and engineers (like himself), with a place for everyone—Jews included. Arthur had traveled a long way from home, and unbefitting a “bird of passage,” he had lost his bearings.

With his high-flown theories, he had lost me too, although his dialectic skill continued to impress me as long as I knew him. I wonder what happened to Arthur. He and Olga were not meant for each other; they soon grew apart and the Lobinskis went to Palestine, as Israel was called then, soon after 1933.

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The cracks in the social fabric were beginning to show now: depression, unemployment, political instability and with it all, a general loss of faith. To put it mildly, we were not impressed by the record of the older generation which we held responsible for this untidy state of affairs.

Formerly, the *Wandervogel* had left the movement behind as they grew up, looking back at it as a mean ingful episode. This was changing now; the movement turned into an institution to fill the void in the outside world. For Paleface and other youths it was a welcome opportunity to prolong his stay in the group, with its warmth and intimacy, and perhaps he had a premonition that the future had an important purpose in store for the *Kameraden*.

Politically they were scattering towards the Left and Right now, people like Paleface and Arthur—and almost anybody who had brains enough to “discern a trend.” The status quo held no excitement and no hope.

It was only natural that Paleface would turn to the socialist camp. He was strongly attracted by the Religious Socialists who rejected Marxist materialism in favor of spiritual appeal. We met socialist youth groups in serious discussions and marched in a May Day parade, to the chagrin of our parents.

Most of the boys had entered working life by now; Paleface clerked in a bank but his work was second in importance to life in the group—the movement which served him as protection from an inclement society. In his estimation, it was hardly worthwhile to make a success of the job: the capitalist system was on its last legs—the great change was not far off.

“What makes you so sure there won’t be a recovery?” I asked him. “You’ve heard of cycles—ups and downs, you know.”

“There has never been a crisis like this; it’s the end. The evils of capitalism have come home to roost.”

“Do you think another system—whatever it may be—will be perfect? Why can’t we go out into the world and try to improve conditions, doing as much as we can—each of us?”

“It won’t work. And we will dirty our fingers in the bargain. This must not happen. We have to keep clean—and clear of entanglement.”

“How can you know that your ideas are valid if you never put them to a test, even in a small way? We might be wrong—and would never know it. I, for one, am willing to give it a try—knock about a little and see what happens.” And with a wry smile, I added: “After a while, it may not even hurt any more.”

The truth was that, unlike Paleface, I derived increasing satisfaction from my work in the business world. I was doing something useful; my boss liked me, and I enjoyed the hustle and bustle at the office. And then there was Ursula, the new file clerk, a shapely little brunette who was making eyes at me.

One of the extra chores which rested with the apprentices was “key duty”—staying late at night until the work rooms were swept clean, and then locking all the doors. The boys were taking it in rotation; it was quite lonesome in the big factory, with only Frau RübSam, the cleaning woman, to talk to, although she was garrulous enough.

One night when it was my turn I noticed Ursula still fussing with her files after everybody had gone. They worked her hard, yet she never complained; now she was asking me to help her with a cabinet door. I got it open with some effort—it really *had* been jammed tight, she wasn’t pretending—and she thanked me profusely, with a sidelong glance. And then, rather abruptly, I reached out and kissed her.

I had to push myself a little to do it. Ursula was neatly turned out, with smooth, short-cropped hair and nice legs, yet she didn’t really attract me as a *person*. If she had, I might have been too scared to act. But some inner force compelled me to do this; I had talked long enough about it, with Ham and Red and others, had thought and dreamed about it, and now the moment had come to go ahead.

I had kissed girls before, of course, but now it couldn’t stop there. I had to explore the whole mysterious thing, once and for all. The girl resisted a little, but then she seemed to

be as eager as I. Afterwards she gave me an astonished look, a little sad perhaps that it was all over.

I, too, was amazed about the simplicity of it all. The mystery was resolved, but unlike other riddles this one was capable of ever-new solutions. There were other “key duty” nights, when Ursula stayed after hours and I helped her with her filing. I became quite entangled, in a way Paleface never thought of.

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With adolescence came the inevitable conflicts of *Sturm und Drang*: tenderness and cruelty, touches of mysticism and of cold logic—the world of reality and the things Paleface held dear. In a way, he was still my leader, and I was not ready to cut the ties. One way out of the dilemma was to keep matters in straight compartments—a division of spheres, as it were. At seventeen, I already led a double life.

I began to see more of Martha now. In her straightforward way and unaffected manner she appealed to me—and never for a moment gave me palpitations, as Olga had done. Through a kind of faulty syllogism I endowed her with virtues she may never have possessed: since she was not pretty I thought she had to be good and noble. Martha was like a sister—only better because I never fought with her, as I had with my own.

Sis came back from America around this time; the Depression had descended on those shores, and much of the glitter was gone. We got along much better now; Sis was engaged.

Ham and I quizzed her about coeducation, but she was uncommunicative. He was still talking about Siam and tiger hunts, but somehow he wasn't his old cheerful self these days. I wondered how things were going at home—with his parents so much at odds—but he didn't say anything. And then he revealed something which made me quite mad.

Apparently Ellen had said things about Martha, intimating that she was not as good and innocent as she made out to be, or as I thought she was. Ellen had vaguely hinted at certain *vices*, without being specific about it. The way I felt about Martha I was sure it couldn't be sex, which may or may not have been a bit dense of me. But what else *could* it be?

To this day I am in the dark about the nature of Martha's vices because the matter was forgotten in the excitement of the next few days.

Ham called me in the morning, asking me to meet him right away. On my way, at a newsstand, I caught a glimpse of a headline, saying something about *Doppelselbstmord*, German for suicide pact, but I did not connect it right away. And then, when I reached Ham, I found out that it was his mother. He was in shock, of course, but pulled himself together after a while. All in all, he behaved like a man. I never asked too many questions but it was definitely not the consul, nor any of the theater people his mother had been friendly with. The bodies were found in a clearing in the woods—one of many forests

surrounding the city—resting peacefully side by side, a revolver nearby. The man was an engineer and was married, maintaining a family while he carried on this affair.

My mother insisted that Ham come to stay with us for a few days. After the funeral he went back home to the old man, who seemed not much worse for wear; perhaps he was in a stupor. Soon Ham was to be separated from him—and us all—since his mother’s family insisted that he come to live with them in Frankfurt.

It was around this time that I became familiar with the work of Martin Buber, and one Sunday morning we met him face to face, in a small, intimate circle. Over the years, I still remember his eyes, at once confident and proving, and the well-cared hands stroking the full beard as the voice urged or soothed, thundered or became subdued. Here was an artist, a virtuoso of the spoken word, but also a prolific writer and translator of the Bible. The ideas and images poured easily from his lips. Was this the genuine article, I mused, or just another kind of “dialectics”?

Buber took a deep interest in the young generation, we had been told; in his own words youth was the “lucky chance” of humanity, forever renewing itself.

“What can we do?” someone asked. “We young people have no power.”

“The question is badly posed,” was Buber’s reply. “But if you ask ‘What have *I* to do?’ you will soon be joined by unknown comrades, and their answer will be: ‘You shall not withhold yourself.’”

“Are we to join a political movement, then?”

“This is not the answer,” Buber said. “If individualism understands only part of man, collectivism understands man only as a part; neither advances to the *wholeness* of man.”

“To achieve the true community we must begin here and now, this very moment in our daily life, building a bridge from person to person. But before we can do that it is first necessary to be a person again, to rescue one’s own self.”

“Only men who are capable of saying *Thou* to each other can truly say *We* to one another.”

This was a new experience, with the words and sentences assuming a magical power greater than their parts. Here was an inspired man, opening up vistas of a spiritual domain which assumed reality through his presence.

We all took something from this talk, this dialogue. Could there be a greater tribute to any man? Paleface was reaffirmed in his faith in the group, the community. In my view, Buber’s words were an endorsement of the individual and his contact with other persons, however few. Nobody could love a whole community, people *en masse*, as it were.

With Martha, this was possible. For a little longer—until she entered a Swiss boarding school—she occupied the place of the “person” in my life; an object of my

admiration and affection. Perhaps sympathy would be a better word for it although, far from pitying her, I was inclined to idealize.

Ours was probably never a true relationship in Buber's sense because it was lopsided. I saw her my way, and she may have expected more than I was willing to give.

* * *

Going to the theatre was something of an occasion then, and the subdued elegance of our *Staatstheater* was suited to a festive mood. The repertory included most of the German classics, some modern works and several of Ibsen's plays. One day I went to see *Peer Gynt* and I was impressed by its intricate plot, the staging and the music.

During the intermission I met Bert—an Ibsen devotee of late, he had read all of his plays. When Bert caught on to something he went all out for it, especially books. He proceeded to give me his expert interpretation.

“This is one of his early works,” he said. “The hero reflects Ibsen's own youthful hopefulness—in the end, he finds his way back.”

I told Bert I couldn't see anything wrong with that, but he hardly listened.

“The one I like best is *The Master Builder*. He is a successful architect who gets everything a man could wish for, but he has one failing: a fear of height—acrophobia. Finally he even conquers that, rising higher and higher. In the process he falls to his death but that seems unimportant to me. He *did* overcome his weakness.”

I was stunned; this sounded fantastic to me. Was Bert going off his rocker—taking something out of fiction at its face value?

And then as we went back to our separate seats he said:

“By the way, I am withdrawing from the group. Lack of time, you know; there is so much to read.”

From now on we felt a gradual loosening of the group ties; it was never the same again after Ham moved away and Bert left, and even those of us who stayed developed other interests as we grew older. There was no estrangement between Paleface and me, as some people thought at the time. It was quite true that he was irked by the *Wintergarten* affair, but he got over it as he had over my earlier lapses.

Red had been after me to go with him to this place which had a pretty bad reputation all over town—the worst “joint” for miles around. When we had settled in a booth I took a look around. The upholstery was quite dirty and the place had a seedy appearance; hardly an atmosphere to cheer people up.

There was a jazz band and girls galore, some with men and others alone. Business was slow, and a few of the girls danced together to while away the time. My sister had

shown me some of the simpler dance steps, and when they played a tango I asked one of the girls. Red followed suit.

She looked familiar—I had seen her on the sidewalks of our main street. Now she wore a form-fitting satin dress, and she danced very close. It was a little embarrassing, but I got used to it. Afterwards we ordered some wine and asked the girls to join us. Red was telling stories and they giggled. Their shrill voices, which had jarred me at first, seemed to fade after a while. I began to feel the wine very much now; it was a new experience. We danced some more, and then the girl in the satin dress led me upstairs.

Hours later—or so it seemed—Red woke me, and we went home. He thought this had been my first encounter but for once I got the better of him. I never told him about Ursula.

Paleface, when he heard about our escapade, blew his top and then we all forgot about it. Red had tattled again, as was to be expected, but the incident had nothing to do with my leaving the *Kameraden*.

My final exit came about when the *Bund* itself broke up. The political stresses and strains had at last caused a breach which could not be healed. Paleface and Bernie, along with many others, formed the nucleus of a new “community” which later went to Israel to form a kibbutz there. The other faction, clinging to the old ideas of the “good life,” continued a shadow existence until it broke up under the Nazis.

The German youth movement on the whole fared badly under Hitler. With its affinity toward the leadership principle it became difficult to draw the line between bona fide leaders and mere demagogues—a distinction Martin Buber never ceased to make. The decision was taken out of their hands anyway. The *Bünde* were outlawed, but many of their members made a courageous stand against compulsion and persecution. And the Hitler Youth appropriated the customs, the institutions—like the youth hostels—and the goodwill for its own sinister uses.

In our town most of the members went with the Zionist wing, and thus I found myself without a home. I could not, in good conscience, cast my lot with them, and for a *Wandervogel* I was getting too old anyway.

The last time I saw Paleface and Bernie was early in 1933, shortly after Hitler came to power. We ventured some guesses how long the Thousand-Year Reich would last.

“Not more than a year or two,” said Paleface, still hoping for an ultimate Socialist victory.

“If you ask me,” I said, “ten or fifteen is a more likely guess.” I was pretty sure there was going to be a war, but I didn’t belabor the point.

Paleface’s Zionist convictions, as those of many recent converts, were like a new suit of clothes—they did not yet sit too well on him. But that was perfectly normal, and only a matter of time. A year later, he and Bernie were on their way to Palestine.

* * *

Of all the members of the old group I am in touch only with Danny now. He lives in Quebec with a family of five and comes to New York for the annual leather show; that's his line.

We get together over drinks—he takes his Canadian straight and in man-sized gulps. When we have a few the talk invariably turns to the old days. It's become a routine by now, with only slight variations in the theme.

“Too bad Paleface had to die so young,” Danny might say. “What was really wrong with him?”

“It's so long ago, I don't remember. He died in a Tel Aviv hospital after a short illness. He was still in his twenties.”

“You know the feeling I always had about him. I wonder whether Paleface ever knew a girl.”

“My sister took a trip to Israel last year and visited the kibbutz. She says they have done real well for themselves—by their standards—and Bernie is a big wheel there.”

“Let's face it, he always had it in him,” says Danny firmly, pouring another round. At times, even today, he is still a little patronizing.

I change the subject. “They tell me that Ham owns a beauty parlor now in Haifa. You know that he became a barber before he went over.”

“A tonsorial artist, eh? Well, isn't that just dandy? And so suitable for a fellow who had the gift of the gab. Did he and Ellen ever get together?”

“No, not to my knowledge. She married some kind of professional man.”

“That figures,” says Danny complacently. “By the way, what do you hear from Red?”

“Not much; he got too ritzy for his own blood. Lost all his hair, though. He made a fortune in costume jewelry, in South America.”

“Selling wampum to the Indians, eh? I never had much use for the guy. But I remember that one time, when we were discussing Albert Schweitzer, Red got very interested in learning all about the natives and how he treated them. I think he was looking for information.”

“That's a new one to me; you never stop learning, is my motto.”

“And it takes all kinds of guys to make the world go ’round, right? Remember Bert?”

“Oh yes, Bert,” I say, trying to avoid a touchy subject. But Danny presses on.

“What exactly happened to him?”

“The autopsy said ‘jumped or fell.’ He put his last cent on stocks that went sour.”

I remember *The Master Builder*—higher and higher—but I don’t say anything; Danny wouldn’t understand.

“By this time, Danny and I are pretty high ourselves.